

New Age Diplomacy: The Role of the Esalen Institute in Ending the Cold War

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This paper has been presented at [the 51st ASEES Annual Convention](#), held in San Francisco, CA, November 23, 2019.



In the early 1980s, one of the most dramatic periods of the Cold War, diplomatic ties between the two superpowers were almost cut off. Massive protests and the peace and nuclear freeze movement, fired up in America and Europe. Triggered by the fear that failure of communication would lead to final nuclear destruction, thousands of American citizens began to establish personal relations with citizens of the Soviet Union. They were inspired by an unusual private citizen initiative pioneered by the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. On the other hand, in the USSR, the only official form of anti-military movement, omnipresent in the educational system and everyday life, was headed by the state's arm of propaganda,

the Soviet Peace Committee. The fear of nuclear war was not what occupied the minds of people in the Soviet Union. But in America, the “Fear of the Red Peril” was cultivated in the media and in popular culture, by science fiction films, TV, broadcasts and literature. Philosophies of the New Age flourished to counter fear with visions of re-enchantment and hopes for spiritual health through empathic and psychic union. The term New Age is used here and in our research-project as an analytic category, an umbrella term for a variety of ideas, beliefs, spiritual practices and movements which are characteristic for contemporary “post-secular” societies. All are linked to the expectance of a new historical era which brings about a radical change of psychological and physiological possibilities of mankind.

So, the politics of disinformation and Cold War paranoia ruled on both sides of the Iron Curtain. By the 1970s, themes of mind reading and mental control, including the uses of technologies for manipulation, became prominent in both countries. Recent research on Cold War relations with the Soviet Union has offered new perspectives on media and conditions to make or break, sustain or distort communicative contact. This includes telepathy, remote viewing and psychic contact. By this, I mean channels of distant transmission of thought-feeling without known form of mediation. Some scholars, such as Vladimir Velminski, theorize on “mind control, brain waves, and telepathic destiny” as models to create and condition an ideal Soviet citizen. Such theories emphasize the radical alterity of a “Soviet mind”. The anthropologist Alaina Lemon takes a different approach. In her book *Technologies of intuition. Cold War Circles and Telepathic Rays* (2018), Lemon describes conditions for contact, which include making (or breaking!) contact not only through technology (camera, telephone etc.), but also performing contact through sensitive mediations and an expanded consciousness of the body (through voice, eye, hand etc.). In my presentation, I will introduce one of the earliest independent Soviet-American peace initiatives which opened up new channels of contact beyond Cold War paranoia. By building and developing “technologies of intuition”, crossing spaces, national borders, and social hierarchies, the Human Potential Movement aimed at and practiced cross conflict mediations in a much broader sense of communication, connecting telepathy with diplomacy, psychics with new media. At a time, when the

New Age culture was about to move inwards and at the same time become commercialized, Esalen, the American center of the Human Potential Movement, initiated a pioneering project of political engagement. As Michael Murphy, one of its founders, said, they moved “way out of the New Age, even way out of the counterculture from which core it had emerged.” The Soviet-American Exchange Program was founded at the Esalen Institute in 1980 (ESAEP) and officially lasted until 1991, when it was renamed the *Russian-American Center* after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It was further reorganized as *Track II* to reflect its present expanded international scope.



The Big House at the Esalen Institute © Birgit Menzel

The Esalen Institute is a non-profit integral learning and retreat center offering workshops, residential education, internships, bodywork and private academic conferences since 1962. It offers cutting-edge inquiry into both intellectual and experiential knowledge of the human Self, exploring body work and psychology, connecting east and west, philosophy and religion. It is a place experimenting with a wide range of alternative approaches to life, while also scientifically exploring them, often with the

aim of producing fundamental social change. Esalen embodies a communal, non-ideological spirit, which made the American Human Potential Movement, as historian of religion Frederic Spiegelberg called it, “The Religion of No-Religion.” The American citizen diplomats owed much to Michael Murphy’s visionary enthusiasm and his wife Dulce Murphy’s enduring perseverance. They set out to seek a common ground with Soviet citizens, as Jim Hickman, the first leader of the program said, in order to “move forward to an expanded consciousness of global awareness for the human race.”



Esalen postcard © The Esalen Institute

The Esalen connection with the Soviet Union began a decade before, in the early 1970s, with the discovery of a common interest in parapsychology. Triggered by the bestselling book of two journalists, Ostrander/Schroeder’s *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain* (1970), American parapsychologist Stanley Krippner and his young assistant Jim Hickman visited Soviet scientists in the USSR, Prague and Warsaw, after Hickman had replicated Soviet research in Kirlian’s *Photographic imagery* (in 1972) that purported to make visible the “human aura”.

When Michael Murphy travelled to the USSR in 1971 with two friends, they met, to their great surprise, numerous intellectuals and scientists with an equally fervent interest in exploring methods of “making visible the invisible fields that surround human beings.” Along with yoga and Theosophy, shamanism and Christian mysticism, they found a lot of similar research on *extrasensory perception* (ESP) phenomena in the Soviet Union. There were just known under different names: “Human Potential Movement” equaled *hidden human reserves* (скрытые человеческие ресурсы), that included psychology of creativity, sexology, cybernetics, non-traditional healing, and sports performance; “maximum performance (антропомаксималогия) equaled Abraham Maslow’s peak experience”. And when in 1979, Hickman and Krippner attended the *International Symposium on the Unconscious* in Tbilisi, the first official Soviet breakthrough of the formerly blocked field of psychoanalysis, they met a like-minded Russian communicative genius, Iosif Gol’din who became the most important gate-opener for all future exchanges crossing social and political hierarchies. The first significant Soviet-American network based on exploring mutual interests emerged. What had begun as human potential mysticism, now became a diplomatic strategy working at what Murphy called an “acupuncture of history”.

Many networks would mushroom up from this. Esalen began to promote their ideas through pre-existing networks, often church-based (such as the Quakers), countercultural peace and justice groups in university towns and large cities, already established ties between US-USSR sister cities, through the *Association of Humanistic Psychology*, or the *Californian Noetic Institute*. It was curiosity, a desire to humanize the enemy, to learn and have actual experience which led professionals and average citizens to join these exchanges. They wanted to counteract media biases and cultural stereotyping, they published newsletters through postal mailing lists, held meetings and spread the word about this initiative. Don’t forget: this was still the pre-internet age! In 1980, the two executive directors of the program, Jim Hickman (1980–1986) and James Garrison (1986–1991), explained the terms and goals of what later became known as Citizen Diplomacy:

“Track two refers to constructive, unofficial, informal interactions between individuals and groups on different sides of ethnic and sectarian conflicts.

Conceived as an adjunct to track one diplomacy (official, traditional, nation-to-nation channels), track two seeks to reduce psychological barriers between contending parties, creating new possibilities for negotiations on more formal levels (Hickman/Garrison)".

And Harriett Crosby, one of the most influential early facilitators of the program, who became a major activist and founder of the *Institute for Soviet-American Relations* (ISAR) on the East Coast, called citizen diplomats "social innovators, risk takers, marriage counsellors, in effect" and described the Esalen citizen diplomacy in 1981, when it was presented to potential donors at the first of the Tarrytown conferences:

"We're creating a more attractive game than adversarial confrontation, a win-win situation where it is in each side's interest that the other do well. Our hope is that, if some crisis occurs, we will have an alternative network of contacts in place that can be called on to help."

There were two periods of the ESAEP. In the first period many projects were initiated (1980–1986); probably the two most lasting and best remembered projects were the *space-bridges/link-ups/telemosty* (1982–1990), and the *Astronaut-Cosmonaut Dialogues* (1982–1985), which resulted in the creation of the *Association of Space Explorers* (ASE, fd. 1985). In the second period, the Perestroika, the ESAEP went global (1986/87–1991), marked most visibly by some groundbreaking events of historical impact, such as the organization of Boris Yeltsin's first trip to the U.S. in 1989, followed by his leaving the Communist Party, and of Gorbachev's trip to the U.S. in late 1991, with the opening of the foundation in San Francisco. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the former directors of the ESAEP organized the *State of the World Forums* and other major exchange events throughout the 1990s, however, independent of the Esalen. The exchange program itself was renamed after 1991, as I mentioned before, and continued under the name of *Track II. An Institute for Citizen Diplomacy*, with Dulce Murphy as president, which is still active in the present.

The main private sponsor of numerous groups and networks of the West Coast citizen diplomacy movement was Henry Dakin, a San Francisco based entrepreneur and multimillionaire with a personal interest in parapsychology, Waldorf education, publishing and media technologies. At *Gallery 3220*, his private intellectual center in San Francisco, he provided office space, salaries, publication facilities and latest technology for the

ESAEP and countless other NGOs. Much could be said about the diverse citizen diplomacy projects which branched off independently from contacts established in 1980. By the end of 1986, more than 232 such organizations had emerged, even though their point of departure from the network around Esalen was later often forgotten or remained unnoticed. I mention only three of the most significant ones: the Exchange of the *Association of Humanistic Psychology* (AHP 1983–1991), the *environmental, anti-nuclear movement, based on Deep Ecology* (since 1987) and the long-term exchange programs by Sharon Tennison, bringing middle-class professionals of middle America together with Russians. This has now been revived in the recent what is basically Cold War years.

What was specific about the Esalen Soviet-American exchange program? I argue that it was the way in which individuals made contact with each other. One of the principles in all communication was complete transparency and sincerity. Nothing was going against the interests of the Soviet or American government. Naturally, every step on both sides was closely watched and scrutinized by both FBI/CIA and KGB. Quoting Alaina Lemon: “Relations of conflicted connection and connection across conflict are difficult to articulate, even under the best conditions.” Jim Hickman, the first executive director, who had a military family background before he turned into a counter-cultural pacifist New Age-diplomat, was regularly interrogated after his altogether 117 trips throughout the Soviet Union. Some considered him a spy, Gorbachev introduced him in a private meeting with Politburo members in Moscow as an altruistic multi-millionaire. The actions of this group of New Age diplomats, as they were ridiculed in the U.S. press, if noticed at all, just did not fit into the common repertoire of possible actions, patterns of communication and interpretation. From early on, the founders Michael Murphy and Jim Hickman understood that they needed to learn from academics and government people how to go about legitimizing their exchange program against the bad press-image, esp. on the east coast. Early meetings at Esalen were lessons in US-Soviet relations from scholars like Columbia professor Marshall Shuman, John Mack from Harvard, and former CIA operative Arthur Cox. Later followed guest lectures from literary scholars and translators. Fundraising venues and connections to diplomatic and official Washington DC circles were arranged by friends of Esalen, like the Jungian psychologist Harriet Crosby.

By the ESAEP person-to-person contacts to individuals in both governmental and structures were established: ranging from high ranking party officials, ambassadors and experts from the Moscow Institute for the Study of America and Canada to psychics, such as Dzhuna Davitashvili, from scientists and writers to marginalized transpersonal psychologists. There were no ties to dissidents or any underground circles. By the mid-1980s, several members of the U.S. National Security Council and leading advisers to the Politburo on nuclear strategy found themselves, together with their wives, in the hot tubs of Esalen. Some of them, including ex-Stalin interpreter Valentin Berezhev, as it turned out, had been practicing yoga for 20 years.



Joel Schatz, Joseph Goldin and Dzhuna Davitashvili in Moscow © Anya Kucharev

Let me give you two close-up examples to illustrate how contact making worked, based on *technologies of intuition* to pave the way for historical breakthrough events, considered utterly impossible by all major Cold War parties until they actually happened:

1) Moscow, July 1982: after the idea of a satellite connection between ordinary American and Soviet citizens came up at a party in Santa Cruz, a friend of Steve Wozniak, co-founder of Apple computers, enthralled Wozniak with the technological challenge of a link-up. Jim Hickman who was known to travel across the Iron Curtain for Esalen, was asked to voice this to Soviet authorities. Joseph Goldin, the communication genius in Moscow, meanwhile a board-member of Esalen, took Jim straight up to the director of the technical division of Gosteleradio, Henrikas Jushkevichius. Along with them came *Apollo 9*-astronaut Rusty Schweickart, a friend of Esalen, who happened to be in Moscow at that time, negotiating the, equally crazy, idea of creating an Association of Space Explorers, i.e. an organization for all humans who had ever been in space. The astronaut's presence at the meeting immediately guaranteed the highest respect, since all space travelers enjoyed exceptional popularity in Soviet Russia. This opened the channel for Jushkevichius to hope for the government authorities' approval of the link-up and he made a remarkable single decision as an individual man in the Soviet communication system – while everyone else higher up was unavailable on summer-vacation. In the following few months, numerous channels of unconventional contacts were opened, seemingly unsurmountable obstacles were overcome, until the first ever Soviet-American satellite link-up actually happened in September 1982 during the US-Festival, a West-Coast equivalent of Woodstock. The early space-bridges connected young people through the universal language of music, while their elders discussed their wonder at exploring no boundaries in space (Rusty Schweickart and Vitaly Sevastianov), the terror of nuclear winter (Carl Sagan and vice-president of the Russian Academy of Sciences Evgeny Velikhov) and nuclear contamination. The untapped new space of communication across the Iron Curtain was then filled with altogether 29 uncensored encounters of Soviet and American citizens: professionals from leading nuclear scientists, physicians against nuclear war, journalists, housewives and youths, even senators and members of the *Soviet Congress of People's Deputies*. The much-famed "Citizen summits" were co-hosted by US daytime TV talk-show master Phil Donahue and Vladimir Pozner, a multi-lingual Soviet journalist who had grown up as a son of a diplomat in Brooklyn, New York, and later became

one of the most highly respected TV talk-masters until present day in Russia.

2) My second close-up example is a 2-day-Gestalt therapy workshop session in Moscow, August 1988 in Moscow with leading Soviet psychologists/psychiatrists and 23 American Union Graduate School Learners. It was led by Francis Macy, a Harvard-educated slavist, who was then program leader of the AHP Soviet-American exchange program, together with clinical Gestalt therapist Roy Persons. 50 people squeezed into a hot summer room meant for 15 people. Instead of lecturing on the concept of therapy, which was new and unknown in the Soviet Union, and having to rely on several translators, the leaders organized non-verbal exercises in groups of two. Then followed, an unplanned psychotherapeutic work of one of the Americans on grief over his recently deceased mother with the leader. His personal self-disclosure had an extremely powerful effect on everyone in the room. On the next day, another American female psychologist opened the Gestaltsession with amazingly personal revelations about family incest and rape experience. Most of the Soviet professionals were deeply moved, others felt awkward and tried to avoid the experience by intellectualizing it. Soviet psychologists were (are?) generally very reluctant to do any personal sharing in front of each other. But then suddenly the most esteemed full professor of the community, another female and a leading full professor of the Moscow University Psychology Department, “came forth herself to do work on (her) dreams, guilt and overly harsh expectations.” Contact was established on several levels; non-verbal person-to-person encounters in exercises (play and dance, fight and heal), verbal contact mediated by interlingual and intersemiotic translation and through direct experience). Communication also crossed social hierarchies here. Research and participation merged.

Let me conclude: All individuals involved in the citizen-diplomacy movement which was introduced here shared a common belief, expressed by Michael Murphy, “that human beings possess immense untapped reserves.” They shared the belief and trust in communications technologies and mediating in a broadest possible sense. That includes new telecommunication technologies as well as technologies of intuition. Maybe

this was one of the main interests on the official Soviet side, a reason to be welcomed by officials in high government and institutional positions:

- scientists making the aura visible (Stan Krippner, Jim Hickman)
- psychics performing telepathy (Russell Targ);
- “Hot tub diplomacy” (Michael Murphy, Jim Hickman).
- Technologies of direct communication: satellite link-ups; e-mail, video-telephone, laptops, desktop publishing (Joel Schatz)
- Humanistic and transpersonal psychology: Trauma therapy, Gestalt therapy, Art therapy (Stanislav Grof)
- Jungian role-plays of Soviet and American army-professionals (Robert Bathurst);
- Deep ecology (Francis Macy: “the work that reconnects”);
- Alpine mountain-climbing of Soviet and American Youth in the Caucasus (Cynthia Lazaroff)

So what was the diplomatic role the Esalen Institute played in ending the Cold War? Three factors stand out here as unique: 1) Esalen took its pioneering spirit to explore the Unknown, the unconscious psychic territory of the inner Self, to the outer world of interpersonal and international relations. In a historical moment of crisis, the arms race and the nuclear threat, the stark standoff and lack of dialogue between the superpowers, a small group of people from California had the willingness and courage to venture into the unknown territory of the enemy.

2) To build networks and establish trusted personal relationships in safe surroundings outside official ideological establishments. The ESAEP paved the way through their pioneering trips, sharing their extensive contacts and experience through elaborate networks, cultivating dialogues with academics, writers, official diplomats, and business people, engaging in technological and cultural experiments like musical exchanges and dialogues on mutual topics of interests. The curiosity of an increasing number of Americans in the 1980s to learn more about the Soviets and courage an initiative to engage with them was based on the model provided by Esalen.

3) Esalen’s activism was not driven or controlled by corporate business. Without the money and other types of support from interested millionaires (I

mentioned Henry Dakin and Wozniak as some examples) and numerous foundations, non-profits and NGO's that funded these exchanges, the movement could not have flourished.

Last, but not least Esalen provided the magic of a natural setting, hot springs and enchanting facilities as a space for meetings. Today, it is hard to imagine how, under again radically changed conditions in a new era of Cold War blockages in cross-border communication, with a probably much more dangerous threats of disastrous conflict rising, the long-term effects of this grassroots movement may be understood. Success and failure, however, do not appear to be appropriate criteria to measure. Exploring the unknown territory and building elaborate networks helped to change history, even if the people and their contribution, their track on history mostly remains invisible and their stories remain mostly untold in the historiography later constructed.

(Some open questions remain for further research: Where did the elaborate networks on both sides overlap, where did they not? What was lost in translation? New Age was rather the motivating factor on the American side – what was considered New Age in late and post-Soviet Russia did not coincide with this movement and most of the people involved in it on the Russian side. There was an asymmetry between the attitude of official organs to the activities of transnational pacifist peace groups in America and in Soviet Russia. For instance, the very few small independent peace-groups in the Soviet Union, reaching out to peace movements groups in the West, especially radical pacifist ones, such as the Trust group, were subject to harsh repression.)

Front picture: On Sacramento Street, groups are actively building bridges across political and ideological barriers using the last technology ©Cover photo in: *Geo*, Special Issue on San Francisco. *Tele-Diplomacy. To Moscow with Love*, June 1998.

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